

HPG Commissioned Report

Fostering local partnerships in remote management and high-threat settings

Emerging lessons from child
protection programming in Syria

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Acronyms

AAAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
CAAFAG	Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups
EISF	European Interagency Security Forum
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
IHL	International humanitarian law
IHRL	International human rights law
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
OCA	Organisational Capacity Assessment
PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SoPs	Standard Operating Procedures
TCA	Technical Capacity Assessment
TWG	Technical Working Group
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

Executive summary

This study documents lessons from child protection activities focusing on psychosocial interventions in southern and central Syria. These interventions have been implemented since 2014 through a partnership between an INGO ('the INGO') and a network of Syrian organisations, using remote management modalities. Given the sensitivities surrounding Syrian humanitarian operations in Syria, international and local partners' names and areas of operation are not disclosed in this report.

Partnerships with local actors are at the core of remote management arrangements, and are the only viable option to deliver child protection interventions in many parts of Syria. Communication and trust are key elements of successful partnerships, and are of critical importance in remote management settings. Flexibility, in terms of a recognition and acceptance that delays and disruption to communication and programme deliverables constitute the norm rather than the exception, is a critical element in child protection and other humanitarian programming in remote management settings.

Within the INGO, dedicated programme focal points manage daily interactions with Syrian counterparts. This plays a pivotal role in maintaining open channels of communication and building trust. For the partner INGO and other INGOs implementing child protection activities using similar remote management arrangements, communication and trust consolidate partnerships and help staff keep abreast of programme implementation, retain quality control and ensure that partners act with honesty and integrity. Duplicative requests to Syrian partners by staff of the INGO and a lack of consistent involvement in decision-making risk undermining trust and retarding progress in establishing more inclusive partnerships. Syrian organisations are faced with a heavy burden of reporting stemming from different donors' reporting procedures.

Since the beginning of the Syrian humanitarian operation, INGOs have invested significant effort and resources in strengthening the technical and organisational capacities of Syrian partners. Efforts have been primarily aimed at ensuring that Syrian partners can more effectively, safely and accountably deliver child protection activities and increase their reach, better collaborate with INGOs and meet donor requirements for transparent reporting. The need to

minimise harm to affected populations, children in particular, and the reputational and financial risks arising from weak capacities, and strengthening emerging Syrian civil society are also goals of capacity-building efforts. Reputational enquiries, vetting processes and probation periods as part of partners' selection systems are all risk mitigation measures that international actors have put in place to minimise reputational and financial damage arising from entering into partnerships with nascent and largely unknown organisations in an extremely volatile context. Critically, multi-layered remote management arrangements and limited communication between the INGO and field staff working in besieged and hard-to-reach areas also serve the vital purpose of insulating and protecting frontline responders, thus constituting an important risk management measure.

For their part, Syrian partners are eager to consolidate and scale up their newly acquired role in the international humanitarian system, and see the establishment of partnerships with INGOs and capacity development as instrumental in this. Capacity-building efforts have led to the acquisition of greater technical knowledge in child protection programming and improved organisational capacity, including systems, policies and protocols, among some of the INGO's Syrian partners. This, and an increasingly trusting environment, are gradually reorienting what were initially top-down relationships towards more inclusive partnerships. However, high staff turnover within the INGO and Syrian organisations, and the rapid expansion of the latter across different humanitarian sectors, while remaining at the frontline of the response, may make it difficult to retain organisational capacity and technical knowledge.

International actors continue to grapple with how to provide adequate duty of care to Syrian partners, particularly around strengthening their capacities to better manage the multiple risks that they routinely face when delivering child protection services in conflict-affected areas, and providing predictable funding to cover security-related costs. Despite being at the frontline of the response, local partners receive inadequate levels of financial support.

The following recommendations to international actors, both INGOs and donors, emerge from the study:

On child protection

- International actors should ensure that long-term support and resources for child protection programming are provided to Syrian partners to sustain these services over time.
- International actors need to increase attention to building partners' capacities related to the Affected Populations and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (AAP and PSEA) agenda to better ensure that child safeguarding codes of conduct are in place, and that close monitoring of the implementation of codes is prioritised.

On partnerships

- Streamlining and harmonising reporting requires attention. Under existing coordination mechanisms, INGOs should step up advocacy to donors and UN agencies on the pressing need for common indicators to monitor progress on child protection and harmonised reporting procedures, in line with Grand Bargain commitments.
- INGOs should take appropriate steps to reduce duplicative requests to Syrian partners and ensure their systematic involvement in decision-making processes and information-sharing.
- INGOs should ensure that personnel with responsibilities for partnerships have or are recruited for strong and effective interpersonal communication skills, as these are critical to maintaining and sustaining open communication and a trusting environment.
- International actors should ensure that flexibility remains a key element of child protection programmes in this context, in terms of recognising and accepting that delays and disruption to communication and programme delivery are the norm, rather than the exception. Ethical and legal considerations should be given greater attention under remote management modalities, particularly when capturing financial data and gathering monitoring and evaluation (M&E) information through focus group discussions with children and caregivers.

On capacity-building

- As Syrian partners continue to grow, international actors should ensure that technical and organisational capacity-building efforts are sustained and remain an explicit objective of programmes and partnerships.
- To mitigate the negative impacts of staff turnover and rotation within INGOs and Syrian partner organisations, international actors should continue to invest in knowledge retention strategies to provide increased opportunities and space for sharing and systematically saving knowledge. Investment is needed in technological support (e.g. video cameras and speakers) to enhance the quality and effectiveness of remote training.

On risk management

- Duty of care needs to remain a priority, and more concerted efforts are required by international actors to reduce the transfer of risk to local partners under existing remote management modalities. One step in this regard is for INGOs, together with Syrian partners, and under existing coordination mechanisms, to engage with donors to set up contingency funds to support duty of care and security management of Syrian partners.
- INGOs collecting information and data about programme beneficiaries and partners using remote management modalities must ensure compliance with existing data protection standards.¹
- With donor support, INGOs should step up technical capacity-building and financial support for Syrian partners to improve the collection of sensitive information and data, in line with data protection standards.

1 Such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) <https://www.eugdpr.org/>; *The Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action* of the Brussels Privacy Hub <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/handbook-data-protection-humanitarian-action>; the ICRC *Professional Standards for Protection Work* <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0999-professional-standards-protection-work-carried-out-humanitarian-and-human-rights>.

1 Context

Seven years into the conflict in Syria, prospects for peace remain as elusive as ever. As of November 2017, more than 13 million Syrians were estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance, more than six million were internally displaced and more than five million, half of them children, were living as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (OCHA, 2017; UNICEF, 2018). Civilians, including a disproportionate number of children, continue to bear the brunt of the conflict. Deliberate disregard for international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL) by the warring parties is commonplace; civilians, civilian spaces, including health facilities and schools, and aid workers are all regularly targeted.

Bureaucratic impediments and obstruction by warring parties have made sustained humanitarian access extremely difficult (OCHA, 2017). A complex humanitarian operation has been established from within Syria across internal conflict lines, and across international borders from Turkey, Jordan and Iraq under the ‘Whole of Syria’ approach. The bulk of the cross-border work, including child protection interventions, is being undertaken through remote management arrangements involving combinations of UN agencies, international NGOs and Syrian NGOs.

The role of local actors in crisis response, especially in high-threat environments, and the nature of their partnerships with international organisations, has attracted significant interest in recent years. One of the commitments of the Grand Bargain presented at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) is increased support and funding to frontline local and national responders. While a number of studies have examined partnerships between international and local organisations in humanitarian action through remote management modalities, there is a dearth of evidence on the specific learning emerging from child protection

programming. The purpose of this paper is to start addressing that gap.

1.1 About this report

This report was commissioned by humanitarian actors operating in Syria with the objective of documenting lessons emerging from the implementation of a child protection programme (‘the programme’) by one INGO (‘the INGO’) working in partnership with Syrian organisations using remote management arrangements. The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa contributed to this lesson-learning initiative. The study focuses on partnership arrangements, capacity-building efforts and risk management to distil key lessons in these areas. In doing so, it aims to improve the child protection programme under scrutiny, while also contributing to the (scant) evidence base on how international organisations (INGOs, UN agencies and donors) can best partner with local organisations to deliver child protection programmes in high-threat settings.

The report draws on primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through 26 semi-structured interviews conducted remotely and in person in January 2018 with the INGO, Syrian organisations partnering with it, other INGOs running child protection programmes in Syria through similar remote modalities, UN agencies and donors. Secondary data was collected through a desk review of relevant material, including programme documents and research on remote management in conflict settings and child protection and psychosocial services, worldwide and in Syria. Details of the programme, partners, geographical areas of operation and other information have been anonymised throughout the report for the safety of participants and to prevent identification.

2 Remote management and localisation

The multiple risks to which national and international aid workers are exposed in dangerous conflict settings such as Syria make decisions around access and programming challenging. Humanitarian agencies increasingly find themselves making difficult choices in carefully balancing responding to the scale of need against the risks involved in doing so, whether to their own staff, implementing partners or affected people themselves. Humanitarian organisations have developed measures and risk management frameworks to prevent, mitigate and react to threats while continuing to provide assistance and protection.² These have focused on the progressive withdrawal of (predominantly international) staff to safer areas or fortified compounds when the risk level becomes unacceptable, and the use of remote management modalities (Duffield, 2010; OCHA, 2011; Fast, 2014). Remote management is not a new approach,³ but it has become the default option in some of the world's most dangerous environments (Jackson and Zyck, 2017; see also Rivas, 2015; Steets et al., 2012).

There are various degrees and definitions of remote management. At one end of the spectrum, 'key decision making is retained by international managers who are relocated in a safe and usually distant location, while national and/or local staff and subcontracted organisations remain in situ to deliver assistance and implement operations on the ground' (Collison and Duffield, 2013: 22). At the other end, remote management involves a partial delegation of decision-making power with some support and oversight, albeit at a physical distance (Collison and Duffield, 2013). With specific reference to Syria, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) uses four categories – remote control, delegation, support and partnership⁴ – to

classify varying configurations of decision-making authority (IRC, 2016).

Remote management has the clear advantage of avoiding a complete shut-down of operations, and might be an indication of the strong motivation driving humanitarian actors to 'stay and deliver' (OCHA, 2011; Stoddard et al., 2010). At the same time, its adoption gives rise to ethical challenges and practical dilemmas. By withdrawing international staff, remote management allows humanitarian organisations to minimise the inherent risks of working in high-threat settings, but in the process they often transfer the risk to others, notably national staff or local partners. Remote management, however, is rarely accompanied by substantial investment, including funding, to systematically develop local partners' capacity and increase their security (Stoddard et al., 2010; Jackson and Zyck, 2017; OCHA, 2011).

Policy discourses have increasingly underlined the moral and legal obligations of international actors towards the frontline responders who comprise the bulk of aid worker victims worldwide (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2011).⁵ Developing duty of care⁶ policies, strengthening the capacities of staff and partners to better manage risk and implementing measures to improve their well-being, such as security analysis and information and psychosocial support, are among the recommendations that have emerged so far (OCHA,

2 The European Interagency Security Forum (EISF) has compiled many of those resources in its library (<https://www.eisf.eu/resources-library/>). Also, HPN's *Good Practice Review on Operational Security Management in Violent Environments Number 8* (GPR8) deals with various aspect of security management including remote management (<https://odihpn.org/resources/operational-security-management-in-violent-environments-revised-edition/>).

3 GPR8 mentions several examples of remote management such as Ethiopia, Eritrea and Afghanistan during the Cold War.

4 Remote control: majority of decisions are made by international managers located apart from programs. Limited delegation of authority; remote delegation: partial or temporary delegation of authority to national/local staff at project sites while other decision-makers are in a separate location; remote support: transfer decision making and authority gradually to national/local actors, while financial and strategic oversight is retained remotely; remote partnership: local actors maintain significant decision-making authority (IRC, 2016).

5 Even if the per capita rate of victims of violent attacks is higher for international staff, national aid workers comprise the bulk of victims (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2011).

6 'The legal concept of duty of care presumes that organisations "are responsible for their employees' well-being and must take practical steps to mitigate foreseeable workplace dangers"—a responsibility that takes on additional implications when the employees are working overseas' (Claus, 2010 in OCHA, 2011).

2011; Stoddard et al., 2010; Jackson and Zyck, 2017). Taking stock of changes since 2011 (OCHA, 2011), Jackson and Zyck (2017) found that local partners enjoy limited duty of care support, and that post-incident care and psychosocial support to national and partner staff are still inadequate (see also Zyck with Krebs, 2015).

Strong partnerships based on open communication and trust between international actors and local organisations are the cornerstone of successful and accountable remote management (Howe et al., 2015). Indeed, the importance of inclusive partnerships, both in remote management and direct implementation settings, has long been recognised. In practice, however, little progress has been made to move this issue from rhetoric to reality (Howe et al., 2015; Haddad and Svoboda, 2017; Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015). Experience with partnerships between local and international actors in several contexts has shown that they are often more akin to instrumental sub-contracts and transactional arrangements that do little to effectively harness the potential of local capacity or contribute to a more inclusive humanitarian architecture (Kent et al., 2016; Stoddard et al., 2010; Howe et al., 2015; Wall and Hedlund, 2016).

Partnership and capacity development gained renewed momentum in the run-up to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) as part of commitments to the ‘localisation’ agenda. The idea of ‘as local as possible, as international as necessary’ has emerged as both a central and a contentious point of departure for reforming the existing humanitarian architecture (Fast, 2017). As the localisation discourse evolves, it has become clear that there is less consensus on how it should be implemented in practice. Even the definition

of the term ‘localisation’ and who is local is unclear (Kent et al., 2016; De Geoffroy and Grünewald, 2018).

Moreover, non-Western actors and local NGOs continue to view commitments to a more localised humanitarian action and the devolution of power with suspicion. One reason is that access to funds and decision-making processes continue to remain largely controlled by international rather than national or local actors (Kent et al., 2016).⁷ Progress also seems to be hampered by ill-defined labels such as ‘international’ or ‘local’, which may ultimately create a false dichotomy that suggests that a response must be either international or local (Fast, 2017). Rather, the central question should be who is best placed to respond to a particular crisis. This may be local actors, international actors or both, operating in a way that fosters complementarity rather than competition.

All of these dilemmas apply to Syria, where the complexity of the humanitarian operation, the multiplicity of actors involved, the many layers of risk and the varying partnership models make an analysis of partnerships especially pertinent and timely, particularly in relation to programmes that entail sustained service delivery, such as child protection.

7 Such differences in interpretation became apparent last year when a group of NGOs from the global South argued that donors and international NGOs were backing down from a key Grand Bargain commitment to provide 25% of funding as directly as possible to local and national responders (<https://www.devex.com/news/dispute-over-grand-bargain-localization-commitments-boils-over-90603>).

3 Child protection programming and remote management in Syria

According to UNICEF, the impact of conflict on children has reached ‘catastrophic proportions’ worldwide (UNICEF, 2018: 2). Syria is sadly no exception. Children are killed and injured, tortured, detained, abducted and denied humanitarian access, particularly those living in hard-to-reach and besieged areas (UN, 2017). Even before the conflict, Syria faced a shortfall in child protection, including mental health and psychosocial support services (Save the Children, 2017). The conflict has exacerbated this deficit. In parallel, the huge stress resulting from insecurity and financial hardship has adverse effects on parents’ and caregivers’ ability to fulfil their role as the primary protectors of children (Whole of Syria Protection Sector, 2018). With shortages of psychosocial and mental health services, and caregivers themselves facing acute emotional distress, the sheer scale of child protection needs across the country is clear (Save the Children, 2017; Child Protection, 2018b).

The humanitarian response in child protection in Syria has two main priorities: improving the quality of community-based child protection through support to community structures and psychosocial interventions; and expanding the reach and improving the quality of specialised services for children most at risk, and for survivors of violence, exploitation and abuse (Child Protection, 2018a). International and Syrian organisations, including the INGO and its partners, are reaching thousands of children with child protection services, including through remote management. According to figures provided by our respondents, in 2017 psychosocial support programmes reached nearly 680,000 people; awareness-raising on child protection is estimated to have targeted over 1.2 million people; and nearly 20,000 children at risk or survivors of abuse have been assisted through case management (WoS, 2017).

Given the access challenges that have characterised the Syrian crisis from the outset, local actors have implemented a limited range of child protection activities through remote management arrangements. While remote management enables the delivery of

desperately needed child protection services, it also raises unique challenges and troubling ethical issues. For instance, lack of proximity to at-risk populations by specialised international child protection staff makes it difficult for aid agencies to conduct a sound protection analysis (see also Jackson and Zyck, 2017). In turn, this carries the risk of developing and delivering ill-designed protection strategies and activities.

Another issue has to do with the sensitivities and complexities that surround protection advocacy in general, including child protection. As Stoddard et al. argue, local organisations typically have limited experience in protection advocacy; work in this area can be dangerous in complex conflict settings and, critically, is most often tied to the presence of international witnessing, for instance for monitoring and documentation. When using remote management modalities, protection advocacy often ‘becomes nearly impossible’ (Stoddard et al., 2010: 19).

There are also challenges linked to remotely setting up specialised child protection services such as case management. There is a clear moral imperative to respond to the specific needs of individual children who have survived violence and those with acute protection needs, such as unaccompanied children or Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG). Case management approaches can offer appropriate and tailored solutions to respond to those needs. At the same time, international actors that fund and remotely manage child protection interventions have a responsibility to ensure quality, accountable and coordinated case management services for children at risk or survivors of abuse, and that these services are guided by a host of principles, including the best interests of the child and ‘do no harm’.⁸ While case management is complicated in the best of situations, it is even more so in armed conflict settings. Violence

⁸ See <http://cpwg.net/minimum-standards/> and Global Protection Cluster, 2014.

and insecurity, escalating needs, overstretched staff and limited resources complicate this already difficult task (Global Protection Cluster, 2014). Delivering quality case management services through remote management modalities, and ensuring that case workers on the ground are equipped with the necessary skills and competencies, adds yet another layer of difficulty.

Lastly, in some contexts child protection programmes have been couched under the umbrella of preventing and combating ‘violent extremism’, with donors and governments linking the emotional distress of vulnerable youth with an increased likelihood of ‘radicalisation’ (HPG, War Child and GAGE, 2018). Child protection actors have expressed fears of being co-opted in this agenda, with psychosocial programmes increasingly being driven by objectives to prevent and combat ‘violent extremism’ rather than by the humanitarian imperative of protecting children whose lives have been upended by conflict (ibid.).

3.1 Implementing remote child protection programmes

The INGO has implemented the programme under study over the past four years in partnership with three⁹ Syrian organisations. The programme provides psychosocial support and education¹⁰ for children and their caregivers living in targeted locations in southern and central Syria. Programme activities are purposefully low-key, localised and simple. The programme has zero visibility, so as to attract as little attention as possible. Protection advocacy linked to the programme and other visible, higher-level activities that could expose actors involved, and especially Syrian personnel on the ground, are simply not attempted.

9 During the first three years of the programme partnership was with four Syrian organisations.

10 As the focus of this study is on child protection the analysis does not include specific experiences and lessons learnt on education.

The main programme activity is the provision of direct psychosocial support through structured and non-structured approaches. Structured support consists of three-month courses developed by the INGO and used in several conflict-affected contexts worldwide. Courses contain theme-based modules – for example emotions, conflict and peace, the future – and aim to improve children’s social and emotional coping skills to better deal with the challenges of everyday life in conflict. Non-structured methodologies include a range of activities, such as music, theatre, sport, arts and handicrafts.

Other programme activities include the provision of education for school- and out-of-school children; awareness-raising activities on child protection and education (e.g. open days, distributing educational material for children, parents and the community); pilot case management activities; and capacity development and support for Syrian partner organisations. Teachers, facilitators and case workers deliver psychosocial and education activities as well as specialised child protection services and case management in education centres managed by Syrian partners.

The programme has been designed and implemented through a complex, multi-layered remote management modality that cuts across international borders and internal conflict lines. The INGO is based outside Syria and has established partnerships with Syrian organisations that also have offices and management teams in Gaziantep, Turkey, in neighbouring countries or even in Europe. Operational teams at different levels – psychosocial, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), education managers and field staff, such as teachers and facilitators and field coordinators – are based in Syria and deliver services. In this context, therefore, remote management is used, not only between the INGO and Syrian partners, but also by Syrian organisations themselves, since their overall management, operations, administrative, financial, coordination and oversight functions and teams are split across international borders.

4 Findings

4.1 Child protection, children's wellbeing and remote management

While an in-depth investigation of the effects of child protection services implemented by the INGO under review and its partners was not the main focus of this study, interviews revealed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the effects of programme activities on children. Echoing the findings of Save the Children (2017), many indicated that the provision of safe spaces such as education centres, where children interact and play, provides a much-needed sense of normality and alleviates some of the emotional distress Syrian children are experiencing. In the words of one Syrian respondent: 'children are going through very tough times. It is good for them to come to the centre. Just to be here, dance, sing and interact. They leave the grim reality of war for a while'.

Drawing on their own experiences and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) findings, Syrian respondents often used terms such as 'happier' or 'calmer' to describe the behavioural or emotional changes among children attending structured psychosocial courses. Parents were described as supportive of the programme: they see for themselves the improvements in their children's emotional wellbeing, and often 'spread the word' about those benefits among other community members. Interviewees mentioned that children typically look forward to visiting centres and, on completing a course, many are keen to re-enrol.

Syrian organisations, the INGO under analysis and other INGOs all believed that the child protection activities that are the focus of the programme were better suited to remote management than other humanitarian activities. The provision of psychosocial support through courses that draw on teaching and facilitation skills, as well as non-structured approaches such as art, music and sport, were seen as relatively easy to implement. By contrast, humanitarian activities requiring procurement or more complex, technical skills, such as livestock distributions or WASH activities, were regarded as more difficult to implement via remote management. Referring to the difficulties involved in digging and constructing wells, one Syrian staff member explained how using phone or skype to discuss technical issues and conduct quality control and due diligence severely hampered the process.

All respondents discussed the unpredictability and risks of providing humanitarian assistance in besieged areas. Procurement can be particularly challenging as fluctuations in commodity prices make effective planning and budgeting difficult. As one Syrian staff member put it: 'suddenly prices are higher than originally planned and we have to take decisions on large amounts of money very quickly'. Since the Syrian government and other warring parties control and cut access to supplies in besieged towns and neighbourhoods, only a limited number of vendors are available, and those who are prepared to take the risk operate clandestinely and secretly. One Syrian partner concluded: 'humanitarian work in besieged areas is risky and one needs to know hidden suppliers'.

Notwithstanding the perceived advantages of remotely delivering some programme activities, quality child protection through remote arrangements, including specialised child protection services, is far from easy. This was also acknowledged by Syrian partner organisations and international actors interviewed. Part of this is intrinsic to child protection. Where safe and unhindered humanitarian access is lacking, emergency food, medical and heating supplies can as a last resort be delivered via humanitarian convoys, where trucks enter besieged areas, are offloaded and then leave, as happened in Aleppo in 2017 and eastern Ghouta in early 2018. In contrast, child protection requires a long-term presence. As one international actor noted, having a presence in the community is of paramount importance for effective child protection, to allow for trust and confidentiality among agencies, communities, children at risk and their families to gradually develop over time.

At the time of the interviews for this study, the INGO had yet to train all of its partners in case management (see below). As a result, it was not possible to assess this programme component. Syrian partners, however, strongly endorsed this approach during interviews. They reported limited experience and competencies in case management across the country, even before the conflict. Through the delivery of child protection activities, Syrian partner organisations have increasingly recognised the huge needs in this area as they regularly encounter children who have been recently orphaned or injured, or who have witnessed killings and other forms of violence. Many explained that they felt compelled to pay special attention to these cases, though a lack of expertise,

skills and resources, including community mapping of services for referral, meant that they often did so in an unstructured and unsystematic way. This is an area that requires further attention and study once training has been delivered and services are scaled up.

4.2 Partnerships

Partnerships between international actors and Syrian organisations are at the heart of remote management in the Syrian conflict. Given current conditions, this is the only viable option for the delivery of protection, including child protection, and humanitarian assistance in some areas of Syria.

The Syrian partner organisations have a very recent history. Small-scale grassroots movements sprang up in opposition areas shortly after the start of the conflict, established by volunteers to fill critical gaps in service delivery and to respond to rapidly mounting needs in child protection, education and other sectors. Activities were localised and often improvised, such as setting up spaces for recreation or providing basic psychosocial support. As the conflict wore on, many volunteers fled the country. From their places of exile, such as Jordan or Turkey, they began to establish ties with other actors, including international and national and diaspora NGOs and international and private donors. Syrian organisations and international actors interviewed for this study agreed that they had complementary and mutually reinforcing strengths. Syrian organisations offered contextual knowledge and the ability to access conflict-affected communities; international actors had transferable expertise from other crises, and the ability to set up remote humanitarian assistance operations and provide the financial resources to run them.

Against this background, in 2012–13 the INGO conducted an assessment of the feasibility of working in Syria. During the assessment phase, initial contacts were made with a number of Syrian organisations run by highly motivated volunteers or professionals who were implementing local community-based initiatives to provide support to children in their communities. The INGO made a preliminary selection of partners from this initial pool of Syrian organisations through a thorough background assessment and an Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA), followed by informal enquiries with other actors to gather information about their reputation and track record. After a three-month pilot period, during which the working relationship was tested, the INGO finalised partnership agreements.

Four years into the implementation of the programme, systems and processes have become more structured and formalised, as has the vetting of potential partners.

While word of mouth is still crucial, the INGO has recently introduced more sophisticated identification and screening methods, such as calls for proposals shared within hubs and coordination mechanisms and a Technical Capacity Assessment (TCA). Through this self-assessment tool, prospective partners review and score their organisational and technical capacities,¹¹ and identify areas for improvement.

In interviews, Syrian respondents struggled to recall specific details about the decision-making processes they used to identify partner INGOs. In part this was linked to high staff turnover, which limited institutional memory. Generally, there did not appear to be any systematic approaches among Syrian partners to guide partner selection. As discussed below, many are eager to consolidate and scale up their newly acquired roles in the international humanitarian system, and see the establishment of partnerships with INGOs as instrumental in this.

4.2.1 Communication and trust

Communication and trust were overwhelmingly recognised by all interviewees as the foundation of effective partnerships and of pivotal importance in remote management arrangements. At the same time, there was widespread acknowledgement that maintaining open and unhindered channels of communication in the context of remote management was replete with challenges and delays. Respondents described a typical scenario where the INGO focal point would request information from the focal point in the partner organisation based outside Syria, who would then ask the focal point inside Syria, who in turn contacts the field coordinator, who in their turn speaks to field staff. Once available, the information travels all the way back along the same chain. It is not difficult to see the high likelihood of distortion, in addition to the time it takes for information to travel along the chain.

Insecurity and conflict frequently disrupted telephone lines and internet connections, resulting in loss of contact with staff in Syria for several days or weeks. Again, this was a common reason for delays in gathering information and in reporting. Interviewees also explained how insecurity affected other aspects of the programme, including delaying or disrupting activities, hampering access and displacing field staff and beneficiaries.

Effective and regular communication and the development of personal working relationships

¹¹ For example, existence and quality of policies and systems such as M&E, procurement, duty of care, financial and organisation record-keeping and documentation, etc.

buttressed mutual trust. Interactions, either face-to-face or using email, phone calls or social media platforms (e.g. WhatsApp, Skype, Viber), occurred regularly along the partnership chain. Within INGOs, dedicated programme focal points or partnership managers were found to be of critical importance in sustaining effective partnerships. Personnel in these roles are specifically tasked with managing interactions and daily communication with and coaching of Syrian partners on a wide range of issues, including training, field security and access, reports and the development of programme proposals.

Some INGO respondents believed that these dedicated roles required people with fine-tuned soft skills, such as effective communication, teamwork, empathy and understanding. They also noted the importance of focal points interacting with a small number of partners to ensure the quality of communication and build solid relationships. As one INGO staff member explained: ‘some INGOs have up to eight partners per focal point. It is simply too much if the idea is to have good, ongoing communication and develop solid relations’. While instances of strong, established interpersonal relationships were mentioned, respondents also pointed to high staff turnover as an obvious obstacle to the consolidation of these relationships.

In discussions, INGOs described the importance of building trust through communication as a means to keep abreast of programme implementation, retain quality control and ensure that partners act with honesty and integrity. The following quote is illustrative: ‘INGOs need to trust partners with operations and that they will not hide fraud or problems. Partners need to be comfortable enough with INGOs to raise problems, so that they can be solved jointly’.

For their part, Syrian organisations saw interaction and communication with their international partners as going beyond issues related to programme implementation to encompass concerns for the physical safety of front-line responders. For example, in areas where the Syrian government regains control, field staff delivering assistance and protection risk being targeted, interrogated and detained. To minimise such risks and maintain a low profile, Syrian partner organisations have developed security management measures of varying degrees of strictness, depending on where they are operating and their past experience of security incidents. These include a no-contact policy with international agencies and non-disclosure of the identity of field staff. A number of INGO interviewees told the study authors that, as time has gone on, some Syrian partners have relaxed some of these measures, allowing INGO staff to contact field coordinators in Syria or to plan training sessions. Similarly, while at the start of a partnership INGO staff would deliver

training via Skype audio calls to protect the identity of field staff, today most partners are comfortable with using video calls.

Discussions with Syrian organisations also highlighted aspects related to communication that could be improved. There were complaints that at times the INGO focal points and other staff (e.g. INGO education or psychosocial managers) ask Syrian partners the same questions or request information that is not relevant (e.g. progress on activities in a given area despite previous agreement to halt work in that area because of insecurity). Some voiced frustration and thought that such instances denoted a lack of coordination and communication among INGO staff. INGO staff were also perceived as showing poor understanding of the operational context and the stressful conditions partners were working under.

Partners’ involvement in decision-making processes and information-sharing by INGOs was not always consistent or timely. One Syrian respondent explained that he welcomed involvement in the joint design of the fourth phase of the programme with the INGO, but complained that, following donor approval of the programme, discussions to further refine activities and areas of operations were conducted bilaterally between the INGO and the donor. While there was widespread recognition among international actors of the positive evolution of working relationships and the growing capacity of Syrian organisations, some raised questions as to the extent to which partnerships were genuinely equitable and inclusive. According to one INGO respondent: ‘Syrian NGOs continue to depend on INGOs and donors for programme directions and funding’.

4.2.2 Flexibility

The term ‘flexibility’ was widely used both by Syrian and INGO staff to describe how they dealt with disruption to their activities. In interviews, the term had clear connotations of acceptance and tolerance of delays. A major theme in discussions was that implementing child protection and other humanitarian programmes through remote management needs time, since operating in these settings is not business as usual. This requires recognising and accepting that delays and disruption to communication and programme delivery are the norm, rather than the exception. Donors and other stakeholders should have a greater appreciation of these challenges, and manage expectations accordingly.

The findings unequivocally point to a high degree of flexibility across all levels of the partnership chain. Syrian respondents particularly valued this, and often recognised that INGOs and donors did not exert

pressure to deliver and meet deadlines during periods of heightened insecurity. In addition to demonstrating an understanding of the scale of the threat in this setting, some Syrian respondents saw this as showing genuine concern for the wellbeing and safety of field staff.

4.2.3 Monitoring and verification

The research identified regular interaction with Syrian partners as a critical means for international actors to maintain effective communication channels and a trusting environment. As standard monitoring and verification practices are not feasible in this context, regular communication is important to monitor progress and the quality of child protection services, ensure accountability and reduce potential corruption or diversion of funds.

Triangulating, third-party monitoring and cross-checking information are among some of the key strategies deployed by INGOs interviewed. To further validate information provided in relation to the safety and protection standards of education centres, for instance, the INGO sometimes arranges Skype video calls, where Syrian staff on the ground are asked to record a live video of the centre and share it with INGO staff. Spot-checks on courses or classes are also carried out by the INGO, where facilitators are asked to record live sessions. Focus group discussions with children and parents are audio recorded and submitted to the INGO, to cross-check information provided in monitoring reports.

Discussions with INGO staff revealed a good degree of confidence regarding the overall oversight of the programme, the quality and accuracy of information coming from the field and ultimately the quality of the activities delivered. Positive perceptions were often seen as the cumulative outcome of the efforts discussed so far, including open communication and a trusting environment, and robust monitoring and verification processes.

The findings clearly show the significant efforts the INGO's staff are making to ensure that systematic monitoring and verification practices are in place. This is no doubt positive. At the same time, however, there are ethical and legal questions about the potential implications of capturing information under a remote management modality that could put at risk the privacy and security of data about partner staff and beneficiaries, particularly children. Discussions around monitoring with Syrian partners also revealed concerns around the heavy burden of reporting (see also Howe et al., 2015). In the absence of harmonised M&E systems and progress indicators, when partnering with different INGOs in projects funded by different donors, Syrian organisations have to adhere to

different requirements, guidelines and reporting templates. In the words of one Syrian respondent: 'work and partnership with different INGOs means using different M&E modalities. We try our best to learn but it is hard'.

International actors interviewed widely recognised the challenges Syrian partners face in keeping pace with multiple reporting demands. In line with commitments under the Grand Bargain, there are ongoing discussions within existing coordination mechanisms on how to ensure more harmonised and simplified reporting requirements. At the same time, however, a number of INGO respondents noted the difficulties of achieving this in practice as donor reporting requirements and progress indicators continue to diverge.¹² As further elaborated in the following section, for the time being efforts are focused on strengthening the organisational capacity of Syrian partners, including their systems, policies and protocols, to enable them to better manage different reporting and other requirements, such as duty of care.

4.3 Capacity-building

Capacity-building of local partners is often discussed in the literature as a critical ingredient of genuine partnerships (Svoboda and Pantuliano, 2015; Howe et al., 2015). In practice, however, in many humanitarian operations capacity-building has largely remained an unmet goal, with underfunded activities and questionable effectiveness (Zyck with Krebs, 2015). Studies have also shown that capacity-building activities are typically top-down, driven by the priorities of international actors, and do not always respond to the needs of local organisations (Haddad and Svoboda, 2017; Howe et al., 2015).

4.3.1 Technical and organisational capacity-building

Despite inherent difficulties, building the technical and organisational capacity of Syrian partners has been an explicit and shared goal of international and Syrian actors from the outset, including in the programme under analysis. The inability of INGOs to directly implement programmes and carry out standard monitoring and verification practices, as discussed above, is a key reason for the strong focus on developing the technical capacity of Syrian partners in child protection. As one staff member put it: 'because we cannot see, we must improve the capacity of our partners'.

12 Child protection actors part of the Whole of Syria coordination structure are expected to use and report against a common set of indicators.

According to a number of INGOs, capacity development was also seen as paving the way for strengthening the localisation and sustainability of child protection programmes through working with local actors. In this vein, some saw these efforts as strengthening emerging Syrian civil society in its broad sense, and as equipping Syrian organisations and community actors with the necessary skills and heft to become key players in their communities, in a context where existing official systems had often broken down.

For their part, Syrian respondents acknowledged that partnerships with international aid agencies have catapulted nascent, small-scale organisations onto the international humanitarian stage. This newly acquired role was valued, and most expressed strong ambitions to further consolidate and scale up operations. For some, the goal of expansion has encompassed working beyond Syria and engaging in the Syrian refugee response in the Middle East and Europe. At the same time, they consciously recognised that, in order to realise these goals and remain competitive humanitarian actors, they needed to continue to develop their technical knowledge and organisational capacities. They saw partnerships, regular interactions and learning from INGOs as instrumental in this process.

4.3.2 Training

Training and coaching are by far the most common methods adopted by the INGO to build partners' capacities. Training topics are in line with programme activities and objectives, and include structured psychosocial methodologies, awareness-raising sessions on child protection, safe identification, referral and case management and M&E methods. The bulk of training is currently delivered remotely by the INGO's technical staff (e.g. education, child protection, M&E specialists), using online video platforms such as Webex and Skype.

A host of challenges related to security and technological issues were identified in discussions. Widespread insecurity limits the movements of staff on the ground, who are unable to travel to attend training. Sessions frequently need to be rescheduled as a result. Cuts to electricity and internet connections also regularly interrupt training sessions. Respondents identified the poor quality of sound and video¹³ as making training sessions and learning both taxing and tiring. For example, the limited field view of in-built laptop cameras makes it difficult for the trainer to see all the participants and observe their body language and facial expressions. Trainers said that this undermined the quality of training.

13 Training participants in Syria typically attend live training sessions using a laptop with built-in speakers and camera.

The INGO has taken steps to address these challenges. Where possible, support has shifted from remote training to coaching and mentoring. Daily interactions and open channels of communication between the INGO's dedicated focal points and their counterparts in Syrian organisations are an example of coaching taking place across all stages and activities of the project cycle. Some staff at the INGO explained that technical and organisational support staff, such as M&E and financial officers, are tasked with one-to-one mentoring to enhance learning in these specific areas. This has further strengthened a mentorship culture within the INGO.

Syrian interviewees valued coaching, as it targeted specific tasks within the organisation and made learning, including for personal development, an ongoing, almost daily activity. One Syrian partner explained that the INGO adopted a coaching approach to strengthen the M&E function. Specifically, his counterparts coached him on replacing spreadsheet-based reporting with a centralised information management database. He found this learning process difficult but valuable, as he believed that expanding his skills and computer knowledge would be useful for future work with other INGOs. Another approach involves identifying consultants in Syria, with whom the INGO conducts remote personalised training on a particular topic, such as structured psychosocial activities. Once trained, consultants then deliver face-to-face training with Syrian staff. As one staff member explained, the INGO has also begun to leverage the knowledge that has been built up within Syrian partner organisations; to encourage learning and discussion, steps are being taken to increase the links and exchanges between Syrian organisations partnering with INGOs to implement child protection activities.

Case management services are an explicit objective of the fourth phase of the programme. In 2017, the INGO worked closely with other child protection actors to develop Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) for child protection case management in central and south Syria. A Technical Working Group (TWG) comprising international actors, including the INGO and a Syrian organisation, has also been established. The TWG has drafted a training plan for case management, linking content to the SoPs. The first training session was scheduled for May 2018.

4.3.3 Progress and challenges of capacity-building efforts

Interviewees, both Syrian partners and INGO staff, noted that investments in capacity-building since the start of these partnerships have enhanced technical knowledge and improved organisational capacity

among Syrian partners. When partnerships were first established, the majority of Syrian partners had limited or no knowledge of project management, including reporting requirements and M&E methodologies, or of structured psychosocial methodologies. Some partner organisations have improved significantly in this regard; both international and Syrian actors spoke of some Syrian partners producing quality outputs, such as logframes and monitoring reports. There was a general sense that such gains could not be attributed to the capacity-building efforts of a single INGO, but were rather the result of the collective and cumulative efforts of the various INGOs with which Syrian organisations partner.

Interviewees agreed that greater capacity, in a context of consolidated partnerships and increased trust, has reoriented initial top-down relationships towards more inclusive partnerships. At the beginning, for example, INGOs drafted programme proposals with limited consultation with their Syrian partners. Today, staff outside Syria, technical staff inside Syria and field coordinators on the ground all provide inputs in discussions around programme activities, needs and areas of intervention, and participate in the drafting of programme proposals. Both Syrian partners and the INGO, for example, indicated that Syrian field staff typically decide which awareness-raising activities to conduct on the basis of needs in the community and areas of operation.

According to respondents, high staff turnover is hampering the development of sustainable capacity and inhibiting knowledge retention within Syrian organisations. INGOs interviewed frequently expressed frustration at having to repeat training over and over again as newcomers joined Syrian organisations and trained staff left. International actors raised similar concerns in relation to rapid turnover among staff of INGOs. Syrian partner organisations have also grown exponentially in just four or five years. From grassroots movements comprising a handful of volunteers supported through funds collected locally, they now have hundreds of staff based inside and outside Syria, and partner with several INGOs to implement a wide range of donor-funded programmes spanning multiple humanitarian sectors. In part, this process has been driven by the pressure international actors have put on Syrian organisations to expand. While this was perceived as positive and an indication of strengthened capacities, there were also concerns that expansion has taken place quickly and in an extremely challenging operational context. This has left Syrian organisations with ‘little time to grasp lessons learned, reflect, and further improve’, as one INGO respondent put it. Interviewees indicated that relatively young Syrian organisations were often not yet ready to juggle multiple demands and absorb high volumes of funds.

4.4 Risk management

The discussion so far has underlined the challenges confronting the delivery of child protection in high-threat settings such as Syria. Interviews not only pointed, unsurprisingly, to the pervasive threats and risks in this context, but also to the different narratives surrounding risk.

For their part, INGOs generally understood remote management as a departure from best practice and an option of last resort, with multiple challenges around monitoring, verification and quality control. This is especially the case in relation to complex and intangible aspects of humanitarian action, such as protection (Jackson and Zyck, 2017: 54). For Syrian organisations, complex, multi-layered remote management and limited communication between the INGO and field staff working in besieged and hard-to-reach areas served the vital purpose of insulating and protecting their frontline staff. In this context, therefore, remote management and the related partnership chain represented an integral part of Syrian partners’ security arrangements, and an important risk management measure.

International actors’ strong focus on building partners’ capacity can also be seen as linked to the need to minimise harm to affected populations, as well as the heightened financial and reputational risks that can arise from a partner’s weak capacities. In line with the findings of Haddad and Svoboda (2017), some INGOs feared that shortcomings in their partners’ technical and organisational capacities could have negative repercussions on the ability of INGOs to effectively monitor programme activities and potential negative effects and harm to children, and show in a transparent way where aid has gone and to whom.

In 2012, the IASC established a Task Team on Accountability to Affected Populations and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (AAP and PSEA) with the aim of fostering a culture of accountability and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in the humanitarian system.¹⁴ In the period between the field research and this report’s publication, sexual abuse and exploitation has received increased attention in the media and within the humanitarian sector, including specifically related to the Syrian response.¹⁵ While not a central topic in interviews,

14 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/accountability-affected-populations-including-protection-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse>.

15 See for example recent accusations against local and international actors in relation to abuse and exploitation faced by females in relation to access to humanitarian assistance in Syria: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/women-in-syria-sexually-exploited-in-return-for-aid-df0kxnw20>.

some international actors highlighted harm to affected populations and children, including sexual abuse and exploitation by humanitarian workers, as a key risk associated with implementing child protection activities through remote management. While this issue has not been investigated for this study, it warrants particular attention in remote management and child protection settings.

Reputational enquiries, vetting processes and the probation period as part of partners' selection systems were all risk mitigation measures devised by international actors in an effort to minimise any reputational and financial damage arising from entering into partnerships with nascent and largely unknown organisations. As one INGO staff member put it: 'we can't just go into contractual agreements and start working with an organisation that we don't know. Especially in a context such as Syria'.

4.4.1 Duty of care

Despite progress, international actors continue to grapple with how to provide adequate duty of care to Syrian partners, particularly how to strengthen their capacity to manage risks and, critically, provide predictable funding to cover security-related costs. Despite being at the frontline of the response and routinely facing significant risks, Syrian organisations receive inadequate funding support from their international partners.

The contractual arrangements identified by this study echo those found by Jackson and Zyck (2017: 56), whereby INGOs fund Syrian partners to implement programme activities on the ground, with the partner responsible for the safety of their personnel, and INGOs 'indemnified from any legal liability'. Stemming from a realisation that frontline personnel needed more support, in summer 2016 a number of INGOs, including the INGO under study here, started to support partners to develop and implement duty of care policies.

Progress has been hampered by the thorny question of funding. INGOs, both field offices and compliance offices at headquarters, are struggling with how duty of care costs should be included in programme budgets. Interviewees indicated donors' limited commitment to support duty of care and a lack of clarity around policies on security spending as inhibiting progress. For their part, donors interviewed noted a tendency among Syrian organisations to equate duty of care with personal injury or death compensation as opposed to other aspects, including psychosocial care. Some Syrian respondents criticised international actors' position and raised the issue of risk transfer discussed above. In the words of one

Syrian partner: 'donors provide huge amounts of money for programmes that can be managed remotely. But when it comes to the thin line of a human being surviving, they back off'.

In the absence of a common understanding of and agreement on what duty of care entails and how to fund it, INGOs and international donors are handling security costs as they arise on a case-by-case basis. Some INGOs reported including security costs as part of overheads as a percentage of overall project budgets (around 3%), and transferring the amount to partners to be used as a flexible insurance mechanism and contingency budget. Others ask donors on a case-by-case basis. For example, if a Syrian staff member is injured, the Syrian organisation pays them compensation and the cost is then justified and charged to the project.

These approaches are a pragmatic response to a difficult problem, but they are clearly far from offering a common, harmonised solution, and INGOs and Syrian partners in particular see them as inadequate. Some interviewees indicated that the funding allocated to security was inadequate. For others, the actual cost approach was not always effective since disbursements require proof of expenditure, which can be difficult if not impossible to obtain in some circumstances. INGO staff also saw the case-by-case approach as requiring significant investment of time and resources by both the INGO and Syrian partner organisations, for example to conduct discussions and negotiations every time needs arise.

4.4.2 Staff care

An Arabic-speaking post was established in 2015 within the INGO to provide Syrian personnel with anonymous and confidential access to stress counselling and psychological support via telephone, Skype or email. In addition, the psychologist encouraged Syrian partners to include team-building activities in their workplan and organisation – such as shared meals or brief excursions when security allows it – which was perceived as critical to reducing stress levels, building morale and as a way for supervisors and the organisation to express appreciation for their staff's effort and commitment. The inclusion of budget lines to cover related costs was seen as a way of ensuring that these activities become routine practice. Syrian staff expressed strong appreciation for this service, and saw it as a demonstration of genuine concern by the INGO and the donor for their wellbeing, and a recognition of the tremendous pressure and stress they face. Echoing the findings above in relation to trust-building, one added that it contributed to further consolidating the partnership between the INGO and Syrian partner organisations.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Child protection is an inherently complex and sensitive area of work, and the delivery of quality protection services to children affected by conflict is enormously complicated by remote management. Keeping activities relatively simple, low-key and localised, and delivered through partnerships with Syrian organisations to ensure sustained presence on the ground, has made child protection activities feasible, including in hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

Partnerships established between international actors and Syrian organisations are at the core of remote management arrangements, and have enabled ongoing delivery of child protection services on the ground. International actors have made substantial investments to consolidate and strengthen partnerships. Effective personal ties and a trusting environment are critical and mutually reinforcing elements in this regard. Communication is a key ingredient in the slow and gradual process of building trust; in turn, a trusting environment facilitates open communication, collaboration and joint problem-solving.

Staff care policies, dedicated focal point personnel within INGOs equipped with a range of interpersonal skills, understanding and consideration of the context are perhaps less obvious aspects. But, as the findings have shown, they can positively influence the consolidation of partnerships and trust-building. Flexibility and factoring in delays and disruption are also important characteristics of remote programming in high-threat settings.

In remote management, meaningful capacity development is fraught with challenges to do with the physical distance that separates INGOs and local actors. In Syria, the sheer scale of child protection needs adds another layer of complexity. Developing the technical and organisational capacity of Syrian partners has been an explicit objective of partnerships since the outset of the conflict, and substantial efforts and resources have been invested in realising this goal.

Efforts have been primarily aimed at ensuring that Syrian partners can more effectively deliver child protection activities, better collaborate with INGOs and meet donor requirements for transparent reporting.

Minimising harm to affected populations, as well as the reputational and financial risks arising from weak capacities and strengthening emerging Syrian civil society, with exit strategies and future reconstruction efforts in mind, are also less explicit goals of capacity-building. High staff turnover within INGOs and Syrian partner organisations, and the rapid expansion of the latter across different humanitarian sectors, while remaining at the frontline of the response, may threaten the retention of capacity and knowledge.

Increased levels of trust and stronger capacity on the part of Syrian partners have gradually reoriented initial top-down relationships towards more inclusive alliances. Decision-making processes, however, were found to be not always inclusive, and security and risk management support, particularly around duty of care, remains inadequate.

5.1 Recommendations

On child protection

- International actors should ensure that long-term support and resources for child protection programming are provided to Syrian partners to sustain these services over time.
- International actors need to increase attention to building partners' capacities related to the AAP and PSEA agenda to better ensure that child safeguarding codes of conduct are in place, and that close monitoring of the implementation of codes is prioritised.

On partnerships

- Streamlining and harmonising reporting requires attention. Under existing coordination mechanisms, INGOs should step up advocacy to donors and UN agencies on the pressing need for common indicators to monitor progress on child protection and harmonised reporting procedures, in line with donors' Grand Bargain commitments.
- INGOs should take appropriate steps to reduce duplicative requests to Syrian partners and ensure their systematic involvement in decision-making and information-sharing.

- INGOs should ensure that personnel with responsibilities for partnerships have or are recruited for strong and effective interpersonal communication skills, as these are critical to maintaining and sustaining open communication and a trusting environment.
- International actors should ensure that flexibility remains a key element of child protection programmes in this context in terms of recognising and accepting that delays and disruption to communication and programme delivery are the norm, rather than the exception. Ethical and legal considerations should be given greater attention under remote management modalities, particularly when capturing financial data and gathering M&E information through focus group discussions with children and caregivers.

On capacity-building

- As Syrian partners continue to grow, international actors should ensure that technical and organisational capacity-building efforts are sustained and remain an explicit objective of programmes and partnerships.
- To mitigate the negative impacts of excessive turnover and staff rotation within INGOs and Syrian partner organisations, international actors should continue to invest in knowledge retention strategies to provide increased opportunities and space for sharing and systematically saving knowledge. Investment is needed in technological support (e.g. video cameras and speakers) to enhance the quality and effectiveness of remote training.

On risk management

- Duty of care needs to remain a priority, and more concerted efforts are needed by international actors to reduce the transfer of risk to local partners under existing remote management modalities. One step in this regard is for INGOs, together with Syrian partners, and under existing coordination mechanisms, to engage with donors to set up contingency funds to support duty of care and security management of Syrian partners.
- INGOs collecting information and data about programme beneficiaries and partners using remote

management modalities must ensure compliance with existing data protection standards.¹⁶

- With donor support, INGOs should step up technical capacity-building and financial support to Syrian partners to improve collection of sensitive information and data, in line with data protection standards.

5.2 Areas requiring further examination

- Child protection services through remote management modalities in high-threat settings remain under-researched. More empirical evidence could be generated from the experience of Syria as well as other settings, particularly where case management services have been implemented.
- AAP and PSEA warrant better understanding and investigation in the context of child protection programming in remote management settings.
- Adopting a ground-level view of remote management and partnerships in high-threat settings to explore these arrangements from the point of view of local and national actors. Areas of investigation could include: defining terms such as ‘communication’, ‘trust’, ‘capacity’ and ‘equitable partnerships’, as conceptualised and experienced by local actors; investigating different narratives around risk management under remote management arrangements; gathering local partners’ views on risk transfer as part of remote management; decision-making processes within local partner organisations around partnership establishment and devolution of power; and funding.

16 Such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) <https://www.eugdpr.org/>; *The Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action* of the Brussels Privacy Hub <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/handbook-data-protection-humanitarian-action>; the ICRC *Professional Standards for Protection Work* <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0999-professional-standards-protection-work-carried-out-humanitarian-and-human-rights>.

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Cover photo: Children play in
Al-Aser collective shelter. The
camp hosts around 300 families
displaced from Afrin.

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